

Why younger Catholics are attracted to the Latin Mass

Breda O'Brien: Pope's presumption of bad faith on part of those who attend the Mass is worrying

An announcement from [Pope Francis](#) about the [Latin Mass](#) can still spur headlines and analysis around the world.

The pope has not suppressed the Latin Mass but has made it a matter for each bishop. He does, however, insist that it should not be celebrated in parish churches and that care should be taken “not to authorise the establishment of new groups”. This reverses previous conciliatory gestures by Pope Emeritus Benedict and Pope [John Paul II](#).

I am not a regular Latin Mass attendee (named the extraordinary form by Pope Benedict) although I go a few times a year, simply to show solidarity with people I care about who love it. I sometimes joke that I am too young and too old to fall naturally into the two main demographic groups who attend with the permission of their bishop and are devoted to the Latin Mass.

The first group is a bit older than me. They grew up with the Latin Mass and were delighted when it became easier to attend. I grew up with the Mass in English and find it easier to pray when the Mass is in my own language.

The second group is much younger than me and love it for its reverence, ceremony, tradition and beauty. Something [Timothy Kirchoff](#) said in America magazine about four years ago sums up the attraction.

He had read an interview where Francis expressed his puzzlement about those who, having never experienced it, still wanted the pre-conciliar liturgy. The pope concluded that it is often accompanied by a rigidity that hides a kind of insecurity and “true love is never rigid”.

Kirchoff fell in love with the Latin Mass as a child when he had a profound spiritual experience, a sense of being surrounded by the saints of the ages who would have celebrated the Mass in the same way.

He says that many young Catholics, even though they have grown up with the Mass in their own language, only have a tenuous grasp of the significance of any given moment. He says: “The unfamiliar rituals and language of the Tridentine Rite, however, allows them to see these moments with fresh eyes. Discovering the Latin Mass is, to many members of my generation, what the introduction of the vernacular Mass was to people like Francis.”

Kirchoff does not have a rosy view of a pre-conciliar church where everyone was filled with devotion. For example, he discovered that many men stayed outside smoking until the offertory, because that minimalist attendance fulfilled their Sunday obligation.

In contrast, attending a Latin Mass today requires some effort. There is also a strong sense of community because people make a conscious choice to be there. The standard of celebration is also likely to be higher.

It is a shame Pope Francis did not speak directly to laypeople who love the Latin Mass

The modern Mass is regularly described by participants as banal, boring and lacking in all sense of reverence. (It is still the Mass, no matter how badly it is celebrated.) In his letter accompanying the recent document, Francis acknowledges there are abuses on all sides.

Worse, a Pew Research Center study shows that only a third of US Catholics still believe that Christ is really present in the Eucharist, a central tenet of Catholicism. Surely that is a more urgent problem?

The most worrying part is that Pope Francis presumes bad faith on the part of those who attend the Latin Mass, saying bluntly that the “magnanimity” of his two predecessors has not been rewarded. He says that people who attend the Latin Mass are “often characterised by a rejection not only of the liturgical reform but of the Vatican Council II itself, claiming, with unfounded and unsustainable assertions, that it betrayed the Tradition and ‘true Church’.”

This is true of some strident internet commentators who are de facto schismatics and encouraging others in the same direction. Some traditional Latin Mass communities are hotbeds of conspiracy theories, especially since the pandemic. Others really dislike Francis’s emphasis on climate justice. A tiny minority of priests have imposed the Latin Mass on unwilling communities.

However, most people who attend or celebrate the Latin Mass are Catholics who are striving to be faithful not just to bits and pieces of Church teaching but to all of it.

The French bishops’ statement in response struck a careful balance, declaring loyalty to Rome, saying all must participate in “an authentic Eucharistic renewal”, but also praising the “spiritual zeal” of those who love the Latin Mass.

French church attendance was in terminal decline. It now has thriving extraordinary form communities filled with young families. While somewhat wary due to clashes with a minority of priests who refuse to celebrate the Mass in the vernacular, the French bishops are aware that for many it has been a way back to faith.

Francis surveyed the world’s bishops before issuing this document. Given the human propensity to emphasise the negative, it is unlikely that he received a holistic picture. It is a shame he did not speak directly to laypeople who love the Latin Mass.

He would have perceived a very different reality to that presented by the headline-grabbing internet trolls whom he seems to believe represent the majority.

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